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ABSTRACT

To learn more about the Regional Educational Service Agencies (RESA), Research for Better Schools initiated a multi-year study of RESAs in Pennsylvania and New Jersey. This report specifically describes local educators' perceptions about RESA services and the content areas in which RESAs offered help. It also suggests how successful service delivery occurred. This study is intended to inform general thinking and policy making about how to disseminate useful knowledge to schools. At the same time, it is intended to provide useful information to RESA staff and to state officials responsible for RESAs. A secondary purpose is to compare RESAs with centrally-developed dissemination programs and to explore RESAs' potential to support or supplement such programs. (PN)

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ONLY A PHONE CALL AWAY:

LOCAL EDUCATORS' VIEWS OF REGIONAL EDUCATIONAL SERVICE AGENCIES

William A. Firestone
Gretchen B. Rossman
Bruce L. Wilson

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Field Studies Unit
Research and Evaluation Division
Research for Better Schools
444 North Third Street
Philadelphia, PA 19123

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ABSTRACT

Regional educational service agencies (RESAs) exist between the state and local levels of the educational system to facilitate communications among agencies and provide services that cannot be economically offered by a single district. RESAs can have great potential to facilitate the dissemination of new research products to educators. They can also help educators keep track of new developments at the state and federal level. To learn more about these agencies Research for Better Schools initiated a multiyear study of RESAs in Pennsylvania and New Jersey. A first round of data collection took place in 23 agencies in the two states. Staff were asked to identify school districts with which they often worked. Further data were collected in 68 of these districts.

This report describes local educators' perceptions of the services they have received from RESAs. It is based on interviews with 72 central office staff in the 68 districts. Sixty percent of the respondents were superintendents.

Key findings are:

1. Educators appreciate assistance received in three broad areas: curriculum and instruction, school management, and coping with the external environment. While past research has focused on the dissemination of curriculum-related knowledge, educators are interested in assistance from all three areas about equally.

2. Educators receive assistance from RESAs through long-term projects, workshops, brief telephone and face-to-face interactions and the use of resource centers. While there has been a strong interest in long-term projects as the most effective way to promote implementation, each kind of interaction serves specific purposes.

3. RESA assistance is constructively provided when the relationship with districts is characterized by mutual knowledge and trust, working intimacy, ease of access, and on-target assistance.

4. Personal characteristics of the RESA staff facilitate a constructive relationship. These characteristics include the content expertise of the individual, school "savvy," skill in interpersonal relationships, and a responsive attitude geared to providing services districts want.

5. Formal arrangements also facilitate a constructive relationship. These include governance arrangements--such as extensive advisory committees that promote two way communications--funding patterns that reduce staff turnover, and the availability of a variety of services from a single agency to facilitate continuity in interaction.

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ONLY A PHONE CALL AWAY:
LOCAL EDUCATORS' VIEWS OF REGIONAL EDUCATIONAL
SERVICE AGENCIES

Throughout the twentieth century, the American educational system has grown increasingly complex. We have seen it expand at federal, state, and local levels. As part of this expansion, there have emerged a variety of quasi-governmental agencies designated to serve these levels (Cohen, 1982). Indeed, a major educational development over the last three decades has been the creation of an amorphous "innovation establishment" centered in government agencies, non-profit research and development agencies, and some colleges and universities (Tyack, Kirst, & Hansot, 1980; Fullan, 1982). Reformers associated with this establishment have assumed as their primary task the development and dissemination of innovations to improve education. As a result, a host of agencies and temporary programs now exist to deliver new practices to schools.

While the innovation establishment did create new opportunities for local educators, it also brought with it some problems. For example, most of the innovations that it developed and disseminated were not designed by educators themselves. Rather, their development was, more often than not, someone else's response to social pressures to create more scientists, developments in academic disciplines that content experts wanted reflected in elementary and secondary curricula, or political movements to promote educational equity (Atkin & House, 1981). In some cases, legislation reinforced these pressures to innovate by threatening sanctions against school districts for noncompliance (Wise, 1979).

At least until the mid-1970s, the success rate for getting these innovations put to use was dismal (Welch, 1979). This was due partly to the

fact that early innovators misunderstood the complexity of implementing innovations at the local level (Fullan and Pomfret, 1976). Over time it became clear that creating and disseminating new products with no attention to assisting local educators in their implementation resulted in a hit-or-miss change process. Consequently, this unsuccessful experience led to the development of federal dissemination programs that put local educators in contact with current knowledge in a useful form. Such dissemination programs often consisted of three parts:

- A resource center that typically consolidated a "knowledge base" or pool of research and development products, often translated into more useful forms for local educators,
- A linking organization that employed individuals who coordinated the provision of knowledge and services to local educators by working directly with local personnel, and
- A coordinating agency that held all of these parts together. (Louis and Rosenblum, 1981).

When these programs were able to put field agents in contact with educators, educators were much more likely to select products that met local needs and to implement the products successfully (Emrick and Peterson, 1978; Louis, 1981).

Meanwhile, outside the mainstream of the innovation establishment and closer to the local level, a new kind of agency was developing: the Regional Educational Service Agency (RESA). RESAs were usually formed through some combination of state and local initiatives. Although their purposes varied, one thing that all RESAs had in common was that they provided assistance to local educators. An important part of this assistance, though far from the only part, was helping educators find out about new knowledge and practices that could be used to improve education. RESA functions complemented and sometimes supplemented those of centrally

developed dissemination projects. By the mid-1970s, 39 states had one or more systems of RESAs (Stephens, 1979).

These agencies had considerable potential for both local educators and for innovation disseminators. From the local educator's perspective, RESAs were geographically close to schools, well-informed about local conditions, and committed to local service. As one of our informants put it, they are "only a phone call away." With their ties to state and federal education agencies, RESAs showed promise not only by guiding educators through the growing mass of new knowledge and products, but also by advising them on political and legal issues. These agencies could help determine what demands required responses as well as what new approaches were most likely to meet local needs.

RESAs also had the potential of becoming local bases for national dissemination programs. Many of these programs were dispersed bureaucracies (Louis and Sieber, 1979). That is, they employed generalist field agents who, although they worked for central organizations at the state or national level, were located close to their client districts. Yin and Gwaltney (1981) point out that RESAs provide four advantages for these agents. First, RESAs provide economies of scale because agents could serve several school districts. Second, agents' proximity to local districts make them more accessible to educators than are representatives of other kinds of assistance agencies. Third, since every state can have such agencies, they have broad applicability. Fourth, agents have political and bureaucratic legitimacy as part of the state educational system with their costs subsidized by the state. Yin and Gwaltney further point out that RESA use by local educators is especially great when services are not paid

for by local education agencies. In fact, two national dissemination programs--the National Diffusion Network (NDN) and the Research and Development Utilization Program (RDU)--used RESAs as bases for some of their field staff. Moreover, in a time of declining resources and dwindling support for complex dissemination programs, there was some hope that RESAs might perform dissemination functions naturally--that is, at the request of local educators rather than central policy makers and without federal support.

RESAs' great potential to facilitate communication across all levels of the educational system led Research for Better Schools to initiate a multiyear project to learn more about how these agencies worked and contributed to knowledge use at the local level. This is one of a series of reports on this project[1]. Specifically, it describes local educators' perceptions about RESA services and the content areas in which RESAs offered help. It also suggests how successful service delivery occurred. The study is intended to inform general thinking and policy making about how best to disseminate useful knowledge to schools. At the same time, it is intended to provide useful information to RESA staff and to state officials responsible for RESAs.

A secondary purpose is to compare RESAs with centrally developed dissemination programs and to explore RESAs' potential to support or supplement such programs. In the last decade, these programs have been subjected to a great deal of research (see, e.g., recent reviews by Louis, 1981, and Hood, 1982, that highlight the roles of change agents in those systems). Our comparison suggests that the RESAs in this study provided a greater variety of services to educators and offered assistance in a wider range of content areas, but that there was considerable similarity between factors

that influenced RESAs' success and those that contributed to the success of other systems.

To explore these issues, this paper first describes the methods used in the study. Three subsequent sections describe local perspectives on RESAs in terms of (1) services provided by RESAs, (2) the content areas of assistance, and (3) explanations for successful assistance. Finally, we highlight some of the implications of these findings for the design of dissemination systems.

Methods

This study of RESAs in Pennsylvania and New Jersey was initiated in the spring of 1979. This section describes the study's sample, data collection procedures, and analysis.

Data Collection

In the fall of 1980, teams of two researchers visited 23 RESAs in Pennsylvania and New Jersey.[2] These RESAs included 11 Intermediate Units (IUs), 2 Educational Improvement Centers (EICs), and 10 County Offices. Of these three different kinds of RESAs, the first two concentrated on assisting school districts. At the time of the study, the primary function of the third, County Offices, was to monitor compliance with state laws governing schools. However, these offices provided some assistance as well (for information on each kind of RESA, see Appendix A). These particular agencies were selected after consulting state education department staff and agency directors to ensure variation in size, population density, distribution throughout each state, and reputation for providing effective assistance to clients. During these visits, RESA staff were asked to

nominate school districts who had been frequent recipients of assistance. Our interest was in exploring the dynamics of the assistance process and understanding user perspectives rather than describing the distribution of beliefs and activities in a population. For that reason, frequent user perceptions were more important than those of a random sample. From these nominations, 68 districts were identified for the study. These school districts were located in the different sized regions served by the RESAs and consisted of both larger and smaller districts (for details of sampling, see Firestone, Wilson, and Rossman, 1982a).

In the spring of 1981, researchers interviewed the individual in each district who was most frequently in contact with the RESA and who was responsible for coordinating activities with that agency. Since four New Jersey districts had been nominated for working with both the EIC and the County Office, in these districts two interviews were conducted; one with the person in most contact with each agency. Researchers conducted a total of 72 interviews; 43 were with district superintendents and the rest with other district office staff.

Interviews typically lasted an hour or more, with questions focusing on the relationship between the educators and their RESAs. Respondents were also asked to describe specific incidents of RESA assistance. From our previous research on these agencies (Firestone and Wilson, 1983), we knew that RESA assistance activities had to be placed in the context of a long-term, multipurpose relationship between district and agency. Thus, we asked a number of questions designed to explore the breadth and variety of interagency contact, to place the educator-RESA relationship in the context of other assistance relationships, and to learn about the costs and

benefits of working with RESAs. These interviews provided the basis for this report. Questionnaires were also administered to a sample of 522 teachers, principals, and building administrators in the 68 districts. These questionnaires became a secondary source of data on school districts' interactions with RESAs (for details, see Firestone, Wilson, and Rossman, 1982a and 1982b).

Analysis Approach

Analysis consisted of several iterations between the observations of respondents and the research on dissemination systems and educational change. First, we reviewed interview guides to generate perspectives or themes. Next, we coded the data by domain. This led to a series of analytic memoranda summarizing RESA services by content and activity, the relationship between local educators and RESAs, patterns of influence on RESA services, and overall educator assessments of RESAs. These themes took on additional meaning as they began to show conclusions which were either similar to or different from those of previous studies. These comparisons were conducted because our purpose was not only to describe RESAs as they were viewed by local educators, but also to use these descriptions to advance understanding of how to design more useful dissemination systems. By the time our analysis was complete, we were able to speak to several issues related to providing assistance to local educators, some of which had been discussed extensively before and others relatively unexplored.

Review of initial analytic memos and comparisons with other studies suggested leads for further analysis. Sometimes these leads were pursued

by searching for reinforcing or contradictory quotations from interviews, and sometimes by coding, counting, and cross-tabulating responses. We also turned to the questionnaires administered to building staff for further insights.

Services Offered

The kinds of services that an assistance agency or dissemination system offers can differ on a number of dimensions. One dimension is the basic objective of service. An assisting agency may intend that its information be used at the educator's discretion, it may want to see an effort through to implementation, or it may have some intermediate objective. Another dimension is the time that agency staff invest in any single incident. In some cases, this investment may be quite extensive while in others, it may be relatively brief. These distinctions are useful organizers to characterize the various RESA services.

Our interviews and previous knowledge of RESAs suggested that these agencies offered four different kinds of services: project assistance, training, brief interactions, and resource centers. These services differed most clearly in terms of the amount of RESA time invested in each. However, services tended to differ in objective as well. In this section, we describe each of these services and identify which district personnel categories used each kind of service. Then we show similarities and differences between services offered by RESAs and by other dissemination systems.

Project Assistance

Project assistance was one of the most multifaceted services provided by the RESAs in this study. It also required the greatest investment of RESA time. Projects usually consisted of a variety of activities organized around a single theme or problem. These activities involved workshops, separate conversations, and the provision of materials. Once an issue was identified, RESAs provided whatever assistance their clients required. Sometimes this entailed planning sessions with administrators, inservice workshops for teachers, or the development of curriculum materials or other resources. At other times RESAs served as trouble-shooters with the state, or provided information on some aspect of project over the telephone. RESA-district interactions through projects tended to be long-term and sustained.

Special project involvement was a routine part of the RESA-district relationship but not the dominant one. We asked survey respondents how many special projects they had been involved in during the last school year, defining a project as an activity where RESA staff worked with the respondent on one issue or problem for three or more face-to-face meetings. Half the respondents (49 percent) had not been involved in any such projects and only 13 percent had been involved in three or more.

Two examples from the data help clarify the nature of project assistance:

> We were in the process of developing documents of tenured-teacher evaluation as part of the state mandates. They [the EIC] provided us with sample documents of what other districts were doing so we could model things. They did a workshop for our administrators, told them what to look for, observation techniques, generally how to do it. We drafted things (i.e., documents), they reviewed, critiqued--It was

> an iterative development process. . . . The result was a document, and a policy. We met state regulations, we had established criteria for implementing the process. We are now getting a lot of good information on our staff. (EIC/1/1)[3]

In this instance, the RESA held consultations, provided a model with sample materials, helped the district develop its own model, held a workshop, and ensured compliance with state regulations.

A second example:

> We had a problem four or five years ago: We took learning disabled students out of the the special school and put them back into a normal classroom situation. [It was] done without orientation to the regular classroom teacher. Teachers did not feel knowledgeable about handling LD students. The activity involved an IU resource person and demonstration teacher. . . . It became an on-going process for two years. The resource person met with the group for one day to talk about what an LD student was. Largely lecture and give-and-take. The resource person gave the orientation to the teachers and was available for consultation. He was on call. Very cooperative. Perhaps once per month--that would be a guess. . . . It helped orient teachers about characteristics of an LD child and helped alleviate their fears. We haven't had the same kind of problems we had originally. (IU/11/1)

These examples show how RESAs provided an initial workshop for relevant staff and then followed up with periodic consultations. Other administrators reported that the RESA "helps us through the process" (EIC/1/3) of developing and implementing a program and that it provides a "great deal of help. . . in how to manage the process with the staff" (EIC/1/6). The level of RESA involvement in the process of development and implementation varied. A RESA may have given workshops at each phase (EIC/2/3) or it may have merely "suggested strategies and resources" (EIC/2/3). One administrator reported that the RESA "did the detail work" (IU/2/3) on a program whereas another said that "we do it, but the IU helps us do it" (IU/5/2).

Because their involvement in project assistance varied to such a great extent, it was difficult to classify RESA objectives in these activities.

When RESAs provided implementation assistance, it was usually special projects like the ones described here. However, other objectives were more limited such as, for example, seeing that staff develop skills in some particular area.

Training and Inservice

A second kind of service provided by these RESAs was inservice training for teachers and administrators. Workshops, as discussed in this section, were preplanned, given by RESA staff at intervals, and designed for the continuing development of professional staff. They tended to be more general than workshops conducted as part of the larger process of project assistance. In some cases, these workshops satisfied stipulations in labor contracts about inservice days for teachers. In Pennsylvania, they carried credit for certification requirements.

Educators reported somewhat more involvement with RESAs in workshops than in projects. The median response was participation in two workshops per year. In addition there was a smaller group of workshop devotees, 7.5 percent, who reported involvement in five or more workshops per year.

Respondents reported that their districts used inservice workshops primarily for teacher staff development:

> [We go to the IU] when we need inservice training. (IU/1/2)
>
> They are our first contact. . . for inservice workshops. (IU/4/1)
>
> We have used the EIC extensively for our inservice programs. (EIC/2/8)

Even administrators who reported little use of RESA services for project assistance turned to them for inservice training:

> [The County Office] conducted a Program Oriented Budgeting workshop which provided some training, background, and literature. I now feel more comfortable with POB. (CO/6/3)

> We develop our own resources--don't use outsiders much. . . . We do not use the EIC. . . . The workshops given by [the] EIC helped improve our Professional Improvement Plan. (EIC/2/4)

> I go to [the] EIC sometimes, but most of the time I just do things myself. I use EIC consultants to just bounce things off them. . . . We have used the EIC extensively for our in-service programs. (EIC/1/4)

Inservice workshops were seen as having "a direct benefit" (IU/8/1) to the local district. This benefit was three-fold: first, it was easier to have another agency plan and offer extensive inservice programs; second, it was cheaper for local districts to purchase expert training on a consortial basis; and third, RESA offerings were responsive to teachers' needs. On this last point, one administrator noted that:

> [They develop programs in] practically any area that teachers see a need--programs are developed from teachers' expressed need. (IU/11/1)

Workshops and training sessions required less investment of RESA staff time than did project assistance. Moreover, since these efforts were frequently spread over people from several districts with different agendas, they were less tailored to specific needs than project assistance activities. Training objectives, at least those that were not built into project assistance, rarely involved helping implement something new. More typically, the objective was to ensure that participants had skills relevant to the topic of the training session. This objective was less ambitious with regard to getting knowledge put into practice than the objective of ensuring implementation. However, it was usually more ambitious than providing products because of the time it took to ensure understanding and skill mastery.

Brief Interactions

The low intensity extreme of RESA services was single conversations held either by telephone or face-to-face. Typically, these conversations were used to answer questions on discrete topics. Our data suggest that a variety of issues were addressed. Topics included curriculum materials, state regulations, budgeting matters, and federally mandated programs.

To find out more about these brief contacts, we asked survey respondents how often they were in contact with their RESA by telephone and through direct, face-to-face conversations in the course of a typical year. The median response was five face-to-face contacts and six telephone calls, indicating that these brief contacts were much more frequent than participation in workshops and projects. Moreover, a small number of people were in very frequent contact with their RESAs. Nine percent of the respondents reported 38 or more face-to-face contacts and 50 or more telephone contacts during the course of a year. Thus, the one-shot interaction was the major contact that some people had with their RESA.

For administrators, the telephone was an important vehicle for getting information:

> We touch base with the monitor frequently, either by telephone or when she is in the district. (CO/7/3)
>
> I pick up the phone and call them for information almost on a weekly basis. (CO/8/4)
>
> We get a guidebook from PDE (Pennsylvania Department of Education). If I have a question, I give the IU a call and get an interpretation of it. . . . [Through this] informal consultation, . . many problems have been resolved. (IU/11/2)
>
> We call and they send stuff to us. (EIC/1/1)
>
> I use them so much. For myself, I call them and ask questions. (EIC/1/5)

Administrators also commented that the willingness of RESA staff to respond over the telephone saved their school districts time and money. Furthermore, they noted that RESA personnel always responded to their calls:

> If I need something, I call and they always get back to me. (IU/9/1)

> Any time you call with a problem or question, you always get a response. (EIC/2/7)

> They get back to you. They return your calls. (EIC/2/7)

Responsiveness was a critical element in building a strong relationship between the RESA and the district. This, in turn, set the context for more intensive involvement in special projects:

> The working relationship we have with them is a matter of picking up the phone and asking for their help. We just call. (IU/2/1)

Brief interactions such as those in the examples above generally had limited objectives. The caller from the district defined the service needed and there was relatively little opportunity for the RESA field agent to gather further information or redefine the issue. The objective was simply to answer the question posed by the caller. Occasionally, however, these phone calls led to more intensive services where objectives were greater. In the course of answering a question, a RESA staff member may have suggested something that led to a special workshop or project with the district. In most cases, though, the need and objective were relatively simple.

Resource Centers

A final service offered by RESAs was the operation of resource centers. In the EICs, these centers were libraries where school staff could

find curriculum materials, professional periodicals, and research reports. Several IUs and one or two County Offices also had resource centers on a similar model. Resource centers were the least time intensive of all RESA services. Educators simply came in, found what they were looking for, and checked it out. RESA staff spent somewhat more time with clients if a search for materials was needed. Resource centers were one of the least used RESA services. Only about 45 percent of study informants indicated that they made any use of these centers in the course of a year. A small group of about 12 percent used resource centers five times or more a year.

Administrators did frequently discuss the benefits of IU audiovisual or film lending libraries. This service furnished teachers with 16 mm films to show to students. Although one of its functions was to disseminate knowledge to educators, educators themselves saw it chiefly as a cost-saving way to get materials:

> They have cooperative programs we couldn't provide by ourselves; . . film resources. (IU/3/1)

> Money - [because of our work with the IU] we save considerably . . . films and resources. (IU/7/1)

> There are economic advantages . . . audio-visual and media. (IU/8/1)

The library-resource centers were also a useful source of instructional ideas and classrooms activities:

> Our staff also goes there for resources and materials. Teachers are beginning to see it as a resource where they can get updates and materials. (EIC/2/3)

One service that especially helped teachers get useful materials at low cost was the availability of crafts projects and other materials:

> For instance, make-and-take for learning centers. You can copy them, make them at the EIC. You pay for some materials. Teachers can go. (EIC/1/6)

As with brief interactions, resource centers had limited objectives. Their primary objective was to grant educators access to materials. The initiative rested almost entirely with the educator who came in, reviewed materials, and chose what was appropriate.

Variation in Service Delivery

Our impression of RESA services was that there was relatively little use of project assistance. When it did occur, it took a great deal of time and had a relatively high impact. Use of the resource center was also limited. Training services were used more frequently and brief contacts took place the most often. The survey data allowed us to see how consistent this pattern was for different categories of school personnel and for the three different kinds of RESAs studied.

Table 1 shows that administrators received more services from RESAs than did teachers. The most dramatic difference is with regard to telephone contacts; administrators made an average of 12 per year while teachers made only one. This pattern suggests that the purpose of administrators' greater involvement with RESAs was largely to arrange longer-term efforts and to get answers to questions that teachers did not have. In addition, it is noteworthy that most teachers were not involved in any long term projects in a given year.

Table 1

Median Service Contacts Per Year Between Respondents and RESA Staff

	Administrators	Teachers
Long Term Projects	1	0
Workshops	4	1
Telephone Calls	12	1
Face-to-Face Contacts	6	3
Resource Center Contacts	0	0

Comparison Points

One of the most significant characteristics of RESAs is the variety of services they offer. This became apparent when we compared findings of this study with descriptions of national dissemination programs and other agencies that assist schools. In making these comparisons, we turned to several sources. Each source described dissemination systems (1) where field agents directly assisted educators, and (2) an important part of that assistance included helping educators find and use research on practice-based knowledge. Three of these sources described national dissemination programs, and two described indigenous dissemination agencies:

> The Pilot State Dissemination Program: This was the earliest federal program to operate as a full dissemination system. Between 1970 and 1972, this program supported projects in three states (Oregon, Utah, and South Carolina) to encourage educators to make greater use of the documents stored in ERIC. Seven field agents were employed full-time to visit schools in specified target areas. These individuals helped educators identify needs and relayed those needs to retrieval experts who obtained relevant documents from ERIC. Finally the field agents returned the documents to the person making the request. Experience with this program provided the basis for later ones (Louis and Sieber, 1979).

The National Diffusion Network (NDN): Founded in 1974, this federally supported dissemination system was designed to make innovative programs available to local educators throughout the country. Programs are usually developed by school districts, and their quality is validated by the Department of Education's Joint Dissemination Review Panel. The system consists of two categories of personnel: State Facilitators who are generalists and help educators identify programs that seem to be relevant to their needs, and Developer-Demonstrators who provide training on the program once a district selects it for use. Our information comes primarily from the work of Emrick with Peterson and Agarwala-Rogers (1977) and to a lesser extent from Crandall, Loucks, and Eiseman (1983).

The Research and Development Utilization System (RDU): This program supported seven dissemination systems (four state projects and three national consortia) from 1976 through 1979. Each project was intended to help schools both develop a problem-solving process to systematically identify problems and select a relevant course of action, and implement research-based products or ideas that would help solve those problems. Each project had a central information base that supported two or more field agents working directly with schools. Our information comes primarily from Louis, Rosenblum, and Molitor (1981) and Louis and Rosenblum (1981).

A Study of RESAs: This study by Yin and Gwaltney (1981) looked at three exemplary RESAs in Michigan, Colorado, and New Jersey. In each case, it examined three specific services: staff development (inservice and workshop training); linker assistance where a field agent works with practitioners, usually giving face-to-face assistance at the school or district site; and an information retrieval facility within the RESA where users can obtain written materials. The New Jersey case also falls into our study.

A Study of Institutions of Higher Education: This study by Havelock with Cox, Huberman and Levinson (1982) looked at interorganizational relationships linking a central university with a number of school districts. Two of these arrangements were based on a series of regionalized teachers' centers--in one case using the facilities of a different college--and one provided graduate "fellows" who organized workshops and other assistance activities for member districts. All programs were heavily oriented towards continuing education for teachers.

What distinguished the services offered by the large, federally-sponsored dissemination programs from those offered by the RESAs we examined was their specificity. Each dissemination program offered different

kinds of services. The Pilot State Dissemination Program, for instance, was designed to encourage educators to use written reports in the ERIC file. Because of the kind of service that this was, incidents of use were relatively brief. Typically, the field agent made only two contacts with a client: one to identify information needs and another to deliver relevant reports. The total contact time averaged about 82 minutes (Louis and Sieber, 1979).

The purpose of the RDU program was to help educators successfully implement new instructional approaches through, among other things, a systematic planning process. In this case, the field agent made numerous trips to the school, worked with a variety of people, and continued assistance activities over a relatively lengthy period of time. In many cases, the assistance agency employed specialized trainers on site to supplement the work of its generalist field agents (Louis, Rosenblum, and Molitor, 1981).

The NDN's objective was to implement innovations on its approved list in schools. The time that NDN staff invested at a particular school varied depending on whether the school, after an initial orientation, chose to implement the innovation. In the extreme case, the school met with NDN staff several times and participated in one or two training sessions. Thus, more time was involved than in the PSDP case, but less than in the typical RDU situation.

By contrast, nonfederally-sponsored assistance agencies provided a wider range of services. In both cases, the authors identified a mix of workshops, resource centers, and some form of consultation similar to the long-term projects in this study. Havelock's discussion of institutions of

higher education suggests that assistance agencies vary in the services they offer, but in most cases, there is a heavy emphasis on workshops. Yin and Gwaltney (1981) sampled services of all three types in each agency. However, it is difficult to know why these studies paid less attention to the short term contacts that we found so prevalent, especially with administrators. Because our sample included one of Yin and Gwaltney's agencies, we know that the short-term activities were going on in at least that agency.

Differences between RESAs and national dissemination programs seemed to stem from their purposes and sources of support. By and large, these dissemination programs were initiated in response to some federally perceived problem in putting educational knowledge into practice. Consequently, they were judged according to how well they solved that centrally defined problem. Their purpose was not to be all things to all people. IUs and EICs, on the other hand, were authorized by state law, but their continuation depended, to a great extent, on their ability to meet needs important to local educators. The County Offices we studied were more closely tied to the state and were expected to respond to state needs and requirements. Even here, however, County Office staff said that it was important to have the support of local educators (Firestone and Wilson, 1983). Where local support contributed to organizational survival, a useful tactic was to offer a range of services in order to provide some assistance to a greater variety of individuals.

The Content of Assistance

In examining the content of assistance as it was described in our interviews, we intentionally took a broad view in order to identify content

areas important to educators. The interview format allowed respondents to suggest content categories and to describe them in their own words with no direction from the interviewer. Educators' responses indicated that they valued RESA assistance in many more content areas than had been acknowledged in previous thinking about dissemination systems. The areas mentioned most frequently were (1) curriculum and instruction, (2) internal administration, and (3) management of the environment. Because of the attention given to curriculum and instruction in the past and its prominence in the work of schools, we expected that educators would emphasize the need for assistance in this area more than in others. This, however, did not prove to be the case.

In coding content areas mentioned by interviewees, we had to deal with the fact that some instances of assistance spanned two or more content areas. For instance, assistance with tenured teacher evaluation or Program Oriented Budgeting, both commonly mentioned by New Jersey educators, was coded as assistance in administration. However, because such activities were conducted in response to state mandates, they were also applicable to coping with the environment. Instances like these were coded in all the areas that were appropriate. Coding showed that respondents mentioned all three areas about equally. Sixty-one of the 72 interviews contain references to assistance with curriculum and instruction, 63 to matters of administration, and 62 to external relations.

Curriculum and Instruction

Our definition of curriculum and instruction covered any activity that affected what was taught and the way in which it was taught. Three kinds

of RESA assistance were included in this area: new program implementation, curriculum development and improvement, and teaching staff development.

New Program Implementation. In helping school districts implement new programs, RESAs participated in program selection, pre-implementation planning, and actual implementation. Generally, administrators felt that "[they] help us get new programs off the ground" (EIC/1/1).

In one case, a RESA provided implementation assistance because a district had received funding for a new program:

> I wrote a grant, got it funded, and then asked the EIC consultant to do a workshop. He got the program off the ground and took it so far. (EIC/1/5)

Similarly, an IU helped implement an Arts in Reading Program by giving a series of workshops on using materials other than books to teach reading. The administrator remarked that the "teachers and kids love it" (IU/3/2).

RESAs also helped local districts obtain funding for new programs. In one instance, the local district requested help from the County Office:

> They helped to obtain funding for a program in industrial education. We requested his [the SPC's] assistance. He identified specific sources, channels to get the money, how to write it up for the state, [and told us] who to go to. . . . It worked. He's a great resource for us. I give him an 'A'. (CO/1/2)

In some instances, RESAs initiated the new programs. This was the case when an IU approached the local district to become involved in a Comprehensive Youth Employment Program. Here, the IU assisted the district in all phases of program planning and implementation.

> They were involved in the application process and the design of the project. It is for disadvantaged youths with employment skills. . . . They made on-site visits, they worked with our counselors, helped with screenings. . . . The program is up and running now; it's continuing. Their coordinator comes two days a week to develop job skills, interviewing skills. . . for our kids. (IU/2/3)

Another example shows how a County Office assisted in all phases of a new program initiated by a school district. In this case, the local district experienced an influx of Hispanic students. Finding itself "at a loss as to what to do" (CO/2/1) it began to rely heavily on tutors. At this point, the County Office became involved and helped the district recruit bilingual teachers and set up curriculum programs. It helped to design the program, held inservice meetings for teachers and planning sessions for administrators, and facilitated the certification process. The administrator explained that, as a result, his district had:

> a well-coordinated bilingual program [that is] working very well. [It is] one of the best in the area which helps many of our students. This does not mean we don't have problems, but we are well on our way. (CO/2/1)

More typically, however, County Offices assisted with the funding mechanisms of new programs by helping with grant writing, identifying funding sources, and smoothing the district's way through the state approval processes. Although EICs and IUs were also involved in this phase of the process, their involvement was more likely to continue through to the effective implementation of the program.

Curriculum Development and Improvement. RESAs also gave ongoing programs a boost when curricula needed strengthening or improving. For instance, one RESA helped a district select curriculum materials that would integrate the various aspects of its educational program. An administrator remarked that, as a result of this work with the IU, "a course of study was worked out. The IU consulted with us regarding how to best meet our curriculum decisions" (IU/2/1). Another district worked with its County Office to achieve much the same goal:

> We . . . instituted a single, unified K-8 program. Now we have 85 percent of students scoring above the median. This is a result of both good teachers and CO assistance. (CO/6/1)
> State mandates were a common spur for the initiation of new programs.

Both Pennsylvania and New Jersey have school improvement programs that require schools and districts to evaluate and upgrade their curricula. Although New Jersey's curriculum evaluation process is more specific than Pennsylvania's, both states call for a needs assessment to determine areas of strength and weakness, the development of goals and objectives based on that needs assessment, and the implementation of changes to reach those goals.

In discussing how RESAs had helped their districts respond to these mandates, a number of administrators particularly singled out assistance in conducting curriculum needs assessments. One administrator noted that, as a result of working with the IU, the district had "better assessment tools and analytical participation in the school improvement process" (IU/3/4). Another explained that an EIC had conducted a series of workshops to help the district develop a needs assessment model for curriculum. Later, it helped the district summarize the data and develop a model for other needs assessments (EIC/1/6).

Thus, the EICs, IUs, and County Offices all provided assistance with the technical aspects of conducting curriculum needs assessments, with strengthening and integrating curricula, or with selecting curriculum materials.

Staff Development. The purpose of inservice programs is to develop professional staff skills. It is common for school districts to contract with external agencies to provide specific inservice programs. Due to their training orientation, both EICs and IUs were frequently called upon

to help with this task. Some of these programs were designed to increase teachers' knowledge in various content areas, others were intended to build skills, and yet others aimed to produce attitudinal changes such as sensitizing teachers to exceptional children or understanding parents better.

County Offices included in this study also played a role in staff development although their participation was mostly coordinative. As part of a state-initiated basic skills program, for example:

> [The CO coordinated] reading skills workshops, communication skills workshop, meetings with compensatory education teachers. . This has achieved excellent results. We have seen improved test scores. . . [and] teacher observations and teacher reports about students indicate improvement. (CO/2/3)

Another County Office developed a county-wide inservice program to help teachers individualize instruction. One administrator noted that there were "spin-off effects" as well. "Our teachers learned individualization skills and transferred them to others on our staff. This has been ongoing" (CO/3/1).

RESA staff development activities increased teachers' awareness and knowledge in numerous areas, including learning styles, time-on-task, curriculum mapping, mainstreaming, and new technologies. However, schools reported that they had received the most immediate benefits from skill building activities. Working with the RESAs helped teachers build skills in teaching writing, developing alternative instructional strategies, individualizing instruction, and working with gifted and special education students. Because teachers could use these skills immediately in the classroom, they tended to have the most effect on the instructional program. In describing staff development work with an IU, an administrator remarked that teachers were able to "transfer inservice to classroom results" (IU/9/2). Similarly, teachers implemented new writing skills learned in an

EIC inservice program in the classroom (EIC/2/7). One fairly long-term (8-12 weeks) inservice program run by an EIC increased awareness as well as developed skills:

> They [the teachers] got practical and theoretical background on educational change--educational change to implement ideas in their classrooms. We raised the consciousness of the teachers as well as gave them some tools and strategies to use in their classrooms. (EIC/2/8)

In addition to increasing knowledge and building skills, RESA activities also changed teachers' attitudes. IUs were particularly involved in improving teacher attitudes towards mainstreaming special education students. Generally, schools sought IU assistance because they were running into problems in integrating special students into regular classrooms. The IUs responded by conducting workshops to educate regular classroom teachers about special students and to sensitize them to mainstreaming problems. As a result of one such intervention, an administrator reported that there was "better sensitivity of teachers to the problems of the youngsters" and that "the emotional impact was strong on teachers" (IU/1/5). Similarly, another administrator said:

> The contact and cooperation between LD (Learning Disabled) teachers and classroom teachers has grown dramatically. Through sensitivity of what problems face each of them, there is more discussion and collaboration at <u>both</u> the formal and informal level. (IU/3/2)

Although most frequently associated with IUs, this benefit was also derived from work with EICs and County Offices. In one instance, a County Office coordinated cross-district attendance in a special education program. The administrator reported that the County Office role was "monitoring to see if state and federal requirements and laws are being met," but went on to say that:

> It is also social. The Special Ed teachers are always getting together. They have been very positive. (CO/4/2)

Staff development work with RESAs has produced increased knowledge, new or refined skills, and attitudinal changes in teachers. Local districts perceived these as particularly beneficial because results were transferred directly to the classroom in the form of improved instructional processes or greater appreciation of exceptionalities.

Internal Administration

RESA assistance with internal school administration covered a diverse range of activities. Some were designed to improve the functioning of the school as an organization while others improved the skills and capacity of individual administrators.

Organizational Operation. RESAs contributed to the operation of schools and districts by assisting with planning, budget and cost control, staffing and scheduling, and with maintaining facilities. In Pennsylvania, where developing long-range plans is part of the state mandated school improvement process, RESA assistance in planning was particularly significant. One informant explained that his district was considering combining the state Long Range Planning process and the Middle States accreditation review into a single activity. The IU had worked with the district on developing a planning approach. In another instance, a superintendent explained the IU's involvement this way:

> We went through a step-by-step process doing practice Long Range Plans. We then in turn trained others in our districts. (IU/6/3)

The administrator noted that this process led to more effective evaluation techniques and, generally, to more effective administration.

RESAs also provided technical expertise in budget management. Sometimes, this involved the computerization of budget data. One informant described how computerization had allowed the district to "keep better control of [the flow of funds]". This same administrator further remarked that:

> We know at a quick glance whether we are on track or not. . . . It is valuable to me to have more ready data. Not cheaper, but more efficient and exact. . . . You can watch things better. You can now easily look at all categories of spending. It's efficient; very few errors. (IU/5/2)

At other times, RESAs helped districts comply with state regulations governing the budget process, such as New Jersey's Program Oriented Budgeting requirements. One administrator noted three benefits of implementing the new requirements:

> It helps us defend our programs. We have appropriate information to make hard decisions. It gives the School Board a better understanding of costs. (CO/5/3)

RESAs also helped with staffing and scheduling. For instance, one County Office worked with a district that had to undergo a state mandated Comprehensive Basic Skills review and develop a remedial plan. Here, the review had identified the management of instructional time as a problem. Consequently, the school's schedule was rearranged and the district "utilized the administrative staff more wisely" (CO/5/2).

County Offices also helped districts plan for better facilities development and use. For instance, when one district's facilities were declared unsafe by the County Office, the office worked with the district to obtain funding for improvements:

> The County Office helped us with the grant writing. We also went to a resource person for help with the proposal. The County Superintendent helped by talking to people in Trenton. We got over $100,000. The facilities are all improved and safe. (CO/7/2)

Management Skills. Solving internal management problems often required developing managerial skills in administrators. Sometimes the skills that administrators needed were quite general and came through leadership training. One IU conducted "an ongoing project for principals that involved leadership development activities" (IU/7/1). An outcome of the project was that principals assumed more responsibility for building-level programs. Another district's work with a different IU had a similar effect, "[We developed] school site leadership skills for principals," said the administrator (IU/3/3).

Much the same kind of assistance took place in New Jersey, where an EIC developed and conducted a Middle Management Conference. This conference focused on "team building, decision-making, conflict management, leadership and other areas" (EIC/1/6). As a result, there was:

> Greater communication and appreciation of each other as administrators, because of the process and role-playing. . . . [We did] role-playing as teams and decision-makers, [we learned] skills in those areas.

Administrators reported that more focused skill building was yet another contribution that RESAs made to school management. This was especially true in one New Jersey district where more than half the district's schools did not receive necessary state approval because the required number of students failed to pass the mandated minimum competency test. Our informant indicated that principals had "lost their leadership role" because they spent so much time on paperwork. They had become "glorified clerks" and did not have sufficient time to devote to instructional

issues. This inattention was reflected in low test scores. In light of the number of schools not receiving approval, the state's review team directed principals to assume a greater leadership role for basic instruction. The district then turned to the County Office which helped it develop a series of time management workshops. As the administrator noted:

> We needed to train them [on] how to do this [be instructional leaders], given the constraints on their time by all the special funding program requirements. (CO/2/1)

This instance is a good example of the multiple benefits that school districts sometimes enjoyed through their work with RESAs. As a result of the workshops, record-keeping was consolidated and principals were given more clerical assistance. More importantly, though, principals were able to devote more time to instructional matters and test results improved. What's more, consolidated record-keeping produced better district level functioning because there was less duplication in the centralized management of information.

In addition to encouraging team building, decision-making, and time management skills, RESAs helped administrators develop evaluation and supervisory skills. Evaluation skills are generally thought of as being part of the supervisory process. However, they also play an important role at the program level in, for example, needs assessments and goal setting.

Supervisory skills were sometimes developed in response to state mandates. One respondent reported that as a result of working with the County Office, "[We learned] how to better evaluate the professional staff" (CO/2/1). Another administrator recalled how an EIC had helped with the tenured teacher evaluation process:

> [The EIC] provided us with sample documents of what other districts were doing; we could model things. They did

> workshops for our administrators, told them what to do, what to look for [in regards] observation techniques, generally how to do it. We drafted things (i.e., documents) they reviewed and critiqued. (EIC/1/1)

Management of the Environment

The final content area in which RESAs typically assisted school districts was the management of the school or district's environment. This area has become increasingly important as the country's educational system has become more complex (Cohen, 1982). We have already presented a number of cases where external pressures--often stemming from the enforcement of state regulations--required schools or districts to take some action and where the RESA provided important assistance. This section discusses how RESAs helped educators cope with three sets of external groups: state and federal regulatory agencies, community groups, and other school districts.

Regulatory Agencies. The number and complexity of state and federal mandates affecting public education have increased enormously over the past decade (Wise, 1979). Although there is variation across states, local districts are definitely not insulated from decisions made in state capitols and in Washington. More and more, they are required to develop and implement programs, policies, and procedures that comply with the law. Many of these mandates focus on school improvement. Local districts have turned to RESAs both to keep them informed of changes in regulations and to help them develop programs consistent with those regulations.

A large portion of RESA activities involved providing school districts with a steady flow of information about current and pending regulations. Such information allowed districts time to react, plan, and lobby (often through the RESA) to change proposed legislation. Thus, districts were not

caught off guard when legislation was enacted. Administrators reported that:

> As much as possible we get advance warning of change and impending changes [from the CO]; makes it possible for us to perform more efficiently. (CO/5/2)

> The IU can coordinate legislative activities--alert us to new bills, help support or defeat bills which have been proposed. (IU/10/3)

In addition, RESAs helped districts minimize local disruptions while complying with regulations. By clarifying and interpreting guidelines, "going to bat" for local districts at the state level, and providing technical assistance in designing programs consistent with guidelines, RESAs helped districts sift through complicated regulations. One administrator remarked, "the [County Office staff] are the map I use to guide me" (CO/6/1). Another noted that:

> We get a tremendous amount of help from the CO so when we submit forms, they are right and get approved by the state. (CO/8/2)

RESAs also helped school districts prepare for site reviews:

> There is facility [ease] in meeting state mandates and staying in compliance. Forty-six school districts were evaluated by a team. Allegheny county came out very good and our school district did not have one citation. We credit this to the development of skills [through our work with the IU]. (IU/1/5)

Finally, in helping districts develop programs consistent with the law; one administrator gave this example of RESA collaboration:

> We requested assistance [from the EIC] when the new law [on Tenured Teacher Evaluation] came through. They offered in-service. . . . They may have done it for others but it was tailor-made for us. They brought us a lot of good materials. All our administrators participated in four sessions here in the district. They told us the law and gave direction in the form of sample procedures to meet the law. They reviewed the materials we prepared with teachers. We used our materials in the session. They critiqued them. They gave general information on professional improvement plans and good super-

vision. [As a result], we got a better understanding of the evaluation process and compliance with the law. (EIC/2/5)

Thus, through their association with RESAs, districts were able to keep abreast of changes in regulations and to react and lobby if they chose to do so. Early notice of impending legislation also gave them time to plan for the implementation of new programs. This, in turn, allowed them to operate more efficiently--to project financial and personnel adjustments to accommodate to legislation.

Other School Districts. Because RESAs served several districts within a geographical area, they frequently presented to school districts in this study opportunities for cooperation and communication. Generally, they did this in two ways. The first was by providing information about what other districts were doing. Administrators noted that:

> [We get] knowledge about other programs [from the IU]. We learn about what is going on in other places and see examples of efforts to address areas in which we have needs. (IU/10/2)

> [The people at the EIC] give you feedback in terms of what other districts are doing. (EIC/2/7)

> The CO fosters liaisons with other districts; they're helpful that way. (CO/1/3)

This "information exchange" (IU/6/2) gave local districts a broader perspective of their own operations as well as alternatives they could consider in solving similar problems.

The second way that RESAs facilitated exchanges among districts was to create forums for mutual problem solving. This helped administrators feel less like "feudal lords with a moat around me" (IU/2/3) and facilitated joint political action. Administrators described RESAs' facilitative role as follows:

> The IU provides an avenue to discuss common problems. (IU/5/2)

> The EIC can bring districts with common needs and different approaches together. (EIC/2/1)

> [The CO provides] coordination of knowledge sharing across the county (brought) together districts to share common ideas/plans. (CO/22/2)

Information sharing turned into action in one incident where the IU coordinated the lobbying efforts of 48 school districts to change the state's basic education subsidy. To prepare districts for this effort, the IU arranged for an expert on school finance to conduct a series of workshops on the budgetary process and the state subsidy. Board presidents and superintendents then put this knowledge to use in influencing state legislators.

In another example, an IU brought three districts together to cope with mandated Special Education plans. As a result, the administrator interviewed said, there was better cooperation among the districts:

> Before we used to act as three separate entities. Now we are more likely to share new information and ideas with one another. (IU/5/1)

The Community. In addition to helping districts respond to state regulations and communicate with other districts, RESAs helped develop good relations with community groups. Sometimes, their role was merely to encourage communication, as when they organized or led public meetings. At other times, however, their role was more political. This latter role usually involved advocating the district's interests with a local group.

Several administrators reported that:

> [There are] more public meetings with the community [as a result of the CO]. (CO/2/1)

Furthermore, RESA encouragement sometimes led to a new level of community involvement in curriculum planning. In one school district,

"parents, community organizations, PTAs [and] civic officials" were asked what they considered important in citizen education. Under the direction of the IU, these ideas were then incorporated into a citizenship curriculum for fifth and sixth grades. The program was described as "very meaningful and helpful" (IU/1/2).

Similarly, in New Jersey, an EIC helped develop a community education program. The school district was able to provide more services to the community as a result. "Everything that happens here has a positive significant impact on our district and community," the administrator commented (EIC/1/2).

RESAs second way of helping local districts manage community relations --by advocating the districts' interests with local groups--involved RESAs with both school boards and the general public. Here RESAs served as catalyst for overcoming community resistance or for gathering support for unpopular actions. For example, in dealing with school boards, administrators said:

> [The CO people] help point out to the school board that things need to be done. (CO/7/2)

> [The CO people] help us in getting support from our boards. (CO/10/3)

In selling a bond issue to the public, the result was much the same:

> We were able to overcome adversity in our school bond issue. The CO helped us there. (CO/3/2)

More generally, one administrator described the IU's role as being an "effective stepmother as in saying the IU is causing this to happen--not the district" (IU/6/3).

Similarity in Service Intensity. Although interest in assistance was similar in all content areas, we expected that the intensity of effort

provided in the three areas might differ. For example, one might expect a greater number of brief interactions between RESAs and school districts when dealing with the environment than in curriculum and instruction. In the former case, school districts simply needed to know about new or upcoming regulations. The latter case was more apt to require intensive problem solving assistance.

Although it proved difficult to do formal coding on this issue, we were impressed with the number of intensive projects that did not have to do with curriculum and instruction. For example, the following cases illustrate intensive RESA assistance in district planning.

> Facilities study. The IU was helpful in supplying a consultant, and in writing, typing, and printing of the report. We decided we wanted to do a long-range projection, more than ten years, of enrollment and facilities needs. I knew the IU staff member with experience in this area. (IU/10/1)

> They served as facilitators with the Citizen's Advisory Group. They helped us design a needs assessment questionnaire and worked with us to identify local needs through personal consultations. We requested their help. The result is a good needs assessment procedure. (IU/4/1)

> The EIC provided a number of workshops [on needs assessment]. The first workshop was for task force leaders. . . . We developed a model for needs assessment with the EIC. They did a staff inservice, an orientation to needs assessment in curriculum. . . . After we got the results, they did a follow up workshop. They helped us find a way to summarize the data. We now have a model in place for needs assessment. (EIC/1/6)

> Enrollment declines and school closing. The district asked the County Office to do a study. . . . The County Office got the state facilities planner to come do an analysis. The county superintendent made a formal report to the school board of his findings. I did a series of community meetings to discuss our options. The county superintendent launched it and gave it a credible beginning. (CO/2/2)

There were numerous accounts of how RESAs assisted in implementing administrative changes, usually as a result of state mandates. Most of

these were responses to two legal changes in New Jersey: a requirement that tenured teachers be evaluated and a law requiring school districts to use Program Oriented Budgeting. However, this kind of assistance also took place in Pennsylvania, as is shown in this example dealing with the clinical supervision of teachers:

> Our principals didn't have a handle on supervision. We wanted to create an environment where principals were leaders. I called the IU. They provided inservice. It was an open thing, a series of 10-14 meetings. We dictated what the content of the program should be. They. . . helped principals on supervision. They. . . talked to our teachers about help needed and the rationale for supervision. It was a good in-service program; it was well-developed. (IU/2/1)

The data presented in this section suggest that at least among central office staff, there was just as high interest in receiving assistance in matters having to do with improving administration and dealing with the environment as there was in improving curriculum or instruction. This was especially true in solving those problems that stemmed from regulations. When RESA help was provided in these other areas, it is often in the form of finding resources or information, although more intensive assistance with planning and implementation also took place.

Comparison Points

The RESAs in this study not only provided a greater range of services than did national dissemination programs, but they also provided assistance in a greater range of content areas. Most of the thinking about putting educational knowledge or research into practice has focused on curriculum and instruction. Likewise, the history of federally-funded educational development has largely been a history of curriculum development (Atkin and House, 1981; Welch, 1979). Early models for national dissemination systems

often assumed that what was being disseminated was curriculum products or instructional techniques (see, e.g., National Educational Association Center for the Study of Instruction, 1967).

Relatively few of the studies of dissemination programs ask which content areas are important to educators. Instead, their approach has been to examine the extent to which outcomes that reflected objectives of the program designers--or potential ancillary objectives suggested by the researchers--were achieved by the program. These approaches varied in the extent to which they captured the content of assistance. For instance, the Pilot State Dissemination study examined the extent to which clients used the research products delivered by the field agents. However, the measures employed generally ignored the content of the products (Louis and Sieber, 1979). Data they provided on the content of requests suggest that, in fact, the range of concerns covered more than curriculum and instruction. Forty-four percent of the requests concerned curriculum and instruction, 47 percent had to do with specific categories of students, and 39 percent related to administrative issues (requests were coded into multiple categories when appropriate). These data imply that from the first, educators have had a need for dissemination systems that respond to a broader range of issues than just curriculum and instruction.

The Emrick et al. (1977) evaluation of the National Diffusion Network examined various dimensions of adoption and implementation. Specification of what was implemented can only be done by inference, but an examination of the content of the JDRP approved programs suggests that most of the innovations included are either curricula or instructional in nature.

Perhaps the most extensive examination of outcomes from a federal dissemination program was conducted by Louis et al. (1981) in the study of RDU. This program had the dual intent of fostering the implementation of new curricula or instructional practices in basic skills or career education, and increasing the general capacity of schools to use research for school improvement. The study actually operationalized four categories of outcomes: implementation and incorporation of innovations, incorporation of the rational approach to problem solving advocated by RDU, new learning by school staff, and organizational developments not anticipated by program designers. Curriculum and instruction remained central to this study; it appeared in implementation outcomes and in many of the skills learned by teachers. However, other outcomes represented changes in the school as an organization--changes that could be viewed as administrative. Still, there was relatively little effort to assess the importance of these outcomes (or others) to educators. That was not part of the researchers' assignment.

Explanations for Successful Assistance Relationships

One of the chief explanations for successful assistance by dissemination programs is the presence of strong interpersonal relationships between the assisting agency and the client (e.g., Emrick and Peterson, 1978). In reviewing the theoretical literature on dissemination and field agents, Louis (1981) agrees that interpersonal contacts are important. However, she also points out that much of the literature assumes that the field agent is an independent individual disembodied from an organizational context. There has been very little exploration of organizational and interorganizational factors that might promote successful relationships. The

major exception is the work of Yin and Gwaltney (1981) identifying elements formal interorganizational arrangements that affect service delivery.

Our informants pointed to the importance of both interpersonal relationships and formal arrangements in RESAs' ability to deliver assistance successfully. They also suggested a third factor: interorganizational relationships. Of interest here is the overall quality or emotional tone of the relationship between RESAs and school districts as it is played out in a myriad of contacts. This tone was influenced by both formal arrangements and aggregated interpersonal contacts. Thus, interactions were both formal and informal at the same time.

First we describe the qualities which, according to our informants, contribute to successful interorganizational relationships. Next, we explore the elements of interpersonal relationships and formal arrangements that were important to our informants. This discussion shows how these latter factors contributed to interorganizational relationships.

Interorganizational Relationships

Where informants believed that RESAs provided useful services, the overall relationship between districts and their RESAs was described as having a personal quality.[4] In these cases, mutual knowledge and trust had been built up over time and, as a result, there was easy access, services were finely-tuned to districts' needs, and confidence in RESAs was high. Major descriptors of such relationships were working intimacy, mutual knowledge and trust, easy access, and on-target services.

Where interorganizational relationships contributed to service delivery, people from both organizations came to value working together.

Although relationships remained businesslike, there was an intimacy which facilitated the exchange of information:

> We have a good relationship with the staff at the EIC. (EIC/2/3)

> [There is a] very good relation between their staff and our staff. They are glad to be assigned to our district. (IU/3/3)

> We're quite close to the County Office. Not close geographically, but rather in terms of our working relationship. (CO/9/2)

The quality and stability of this relationship was based on personal relations between staff on both sides:

> I know everyone there so I call up and get advice. (EIC/1/5)

> [We have a] personal relationship with the SPC you can't get with Trenton. Sometimes when you call Trenton, you don't know who you talk to. (CO/10/1)

> The relationship here is very informal; it's based on interpersonal relationships with these (IU) people. (IU/8/1)

> We know all of the people there. [It's a] complicated County but [we are] all small districts--a lot of personal attention is possible. We get more personal attention. (CO/8/4)

The significance of interpersonal relationships was underscored by the administrator who commented that "any regional office depends on the personnel in it" (IU/8/2).

Personal qualities in interorganizational relationships were built up through numerous interpersonal exchanges, including the many brief interactions previously described. Informants noted that the pattern of exchanges must have been stable over time in order for this kind of personal quality to develop:

> It's not a formal relationship; what comes out is an ongoing relationship. (IU/2/1)

> We have established relations with the agency and people who have expertise. (EIC/2/1)

Positive working relationships based on working intimacy built up over time allowed for the subtlety in interaction that Ouchi (1981) says characterizes successful Japanese and American businesses. This subtlety is grounded in mutual knowledge and trust on both sides.

Mutual knowledge gave local districts a good idea of RESA services, allowing for some discrimination when selecting external assistance (see Firestone, Wilson, and Rossman, 1982b):

> I've never been disappointed with the IU. I know what they have to offer. I recognize the limitations when I call on them. They are ready to serve without exception. (IU/1/3)

> The first [place we go] is the IU because we have had relationships in place, we are aware of their resources and people, and down time is less with them than with other types of agencies. (IU/7/1)

Moreover, mutual knowledge meant that RESA assistance could be tailored to local individuality and need:

> People who know about you and what you're trying to do can step right in and help. (EIC/2/1)

> They are sympathetic to our needs and problems--they suggest a course of action. (CO/8/3)

> They know what our problems are. . . . [They are] sensitive about looking into our needs. . . . They cater to our concerns; they are on the same level as we are. (IU/3/3)

Mutual knowledge was described by one administrator as being "in sync with us" (IU/10/2).

The fact that school districts were aware of RESA capabilities, and RESAs knew the districts' problems went a long way in building trust among the two agencies:

> [There is] mutual trust. They give us a quick response and there's a genuine willingness to help. (IU/2/2)

> [The IU is] convenient and quick to respond. . . . I have trust in them. (IU/4/2)

We use them all the time. We feel on safer ground when consulting them because of their expertise. (CO/9/2)

This type of successful assistance relationship--one that establishes a working intimacy built upon mutal knowledge and trust--promoted greater district access to services, provided services that were more responsive and finely-tuned to district needs, and created confidence in RESAs. This was an interactive process: as good services were provided, confidence grew, access was eased and personal relationships strengthened. The separate elements reinforced each other and could not be provided separately. Furthermore, together they fostered responsive, on-target services. About easy access, administrators said:

By virtue of interpersonal relationships, we have access. (IU/8/1)

Anytime we call them, they are available. (CO/7/3)

I call the EIC and they take care of everything. (EIC/1/2)

Among the 58 districts that reported easy access to their RESA and that their RESA provided many valuable services, confidence in the RESA was high:

[They are] good people--they know what they are doing. I have confidence in them. (CO/7/3)

[The IU is a] tremendous resource for a plethora of resources: an unbelievable accumulation of talent. (IU/1/3)

[The] EIC provides assistance in a multitude of ways; . . . it reaches all levels of staff. (EIC/1/1)

The fabric of RESA-district relationships was generally built up over time through many varied contacts between the two organizations' personnel. When this relationship was perceived by districts as having continuity and producing needed services, knowledge and trust were built. This interactive process enhanced access to RESA services and helped ensure assistance

that was timely and appropriate. In this situation, confidence in the RESA was high and local districts reported many benefits as a result of their work with the RESA.

The Interpersonal Aspect

Successful interorganizational relationships had a personal quality based on working intimacy and mutual trust. This quality suggests that the work of the field agents can contribute substantially to interorganizational relationships. To learn more about the work of field agents, the interview included a question asking informants to describe the qualities of an ideal field agent. An analysis of their responses identified three personal characteristics that contributed to constructive interorganizational relationships: professional expertise, interpersonal expertise, and a responsive attitude towards district individuality and need.

Professional expertise. This characteristic encompasses the field agent's training and expert knowledge (Louis and Sieber, 1979)--his or her technical competence in substantive areas--and "school savvy"--his or her knowledge of the everyday life of schools and the wherewithal to deal effectively in that milieu. Fifty-five of the 70 interviews (79 percent) mentioned professional competence as an important factor in a field agent's success.

The first aspect--substantive expertise--was described by administrators as follows:

> The credibility of their knowledge--[they have] superior knowledge [and] skill in a certain area. (IU/1/3)
>
> [They have] expertise in their area of specialization. (IU/2/1)
>
> They need a solid academic background. (EIC/3/1)

> They have to have expertise in what they are coming out to do. (EIC/2/1)
>
> They should be knowledgeable and technically well-trained. (CO/8/4)
>
> [They should be] well-trained; . . . they should be fully knowledgeable about what they really want instead of making things up. (CO/8/1)

However, substantive expertise is not the only area in which field agents should be competent; their success is also linked to practical knowledge of schools--school savvy. This was typically described by administrators as experience in local districts that sensitized field agents to the workings of schools:

> [The field agent] should have had similar local experience in a school. (IU/7/1)
>
> They need experience in teaching, work with children. (EIC/2/1)
>
> The key is that the field agent has some experience in operating local districts; . . . Field agents should have school administration experience, and not just ex-teachers should be employed. (CO/3/1)
>
> First, an agent ought to have experience working in a district, or at least related experience; they need an understanding of how the LEA operates. (CO/8/3)

This experience helps the agent be practical in dealing with schools:

> [They should be] able to get on teacher's level and communicate and understand their problems. (IU/11/1)
>
> [They should] provide services at the school level. (IU/10/3)
>
> They should come in and do. (EIC/1/3)
>
> They need to know the needs of the group they are addressing, . . be concrete and specific; to talk in practical terms. (EIC/1/4)

School savvy also means that a field agent can provide assistance that is timely and up-to-date, and has available resources to draw on. Adminis-

trators noted that the "quality of their resources" (IU/3/1) is important to the agent's success. These resources include other educators who might be able to provide assistance:

> [An agent needs] knowledge and contacts to put you in touch with people who can help you develop programs and solve problems. (CO/9/2)
>
> Field agents should be knowledgeable about who and where to contact. . . . The County Office should be a conduit for us to colleges and other organizations. (CO/7/1)

Resources also include access to regional, state, and national trends in education that may affect local districts:

> [The agent should have] access to national and regional networks of information. (IU/7/1)
>
> [They should] keep the district abreast of new knowledge and trends in education. (EIC/2/3)
>
> They should have their fingers on information and regulations. (EIC/1/5)
>
> [They should be] able to interpret state directions into a workable response, without wasting a lot of time. (IU/1/2)
>
> It helps to have contacts with State Department and to know decision-making processes. (CO/5/3)
>
> [An agent should be] knowledgeable about the state system: current scene in Trenton, where to go for information, who has power and who doesn't. (CO/2/2)

The two aspects of professional expertise--substantive knowledge and school savvy--are both important but in different ways. In fact each was mentioned with about equal frequency in the interviews.

Interpersonal Expertise. In addition to professional expertise, our informants suggested that field agents "need personality to get the job done. . . . Personality is very important; skill is not enough" (IU/2/2). An important component of what informants referred to as personality is interpersonal expertise or a knowledge of how to get along with others.

This includes his or her communication skills and personality attributes. Forty of the seventy administrators interviewed (57 percent) mentioned this as important to a field agent's success. Typically, interpersonal competence was described as "being able to get along" (CO/2/1), "work with people" (EIC/2/7), and as having the "human relations potential to work with a school district" (IU/1/3). Effective communications skills are also necessary:

> Their pattern of communication; [it should be] more than just touching base with us. (IU/3/3)
>
> [There should be] open, professional communications. (EIC/1/6)
>
> It helps to have professional and congenial posture, to know how to present and communicate with people. (CO/5/3)

Part of being a good field agent is being a good listener:

> His ability to listen to those workers in the district--that is a key. (CO/3/2)

Another part is being an effective facilitator:

> Their ability to communicate--they gain a good working relationship by sharing, discussing. (CO/9/1)
>
> [They should have] clear organization and objectives for the delivery of goals. (EIC/1/6)

In addition to effective communications skills, administrators described certain aspects of the field agent's personality as promoting successful work with the district. These include being personable, open-minded, and tactful. Field agents should also be good salesmen but not be imposing or belittling to local administrators and teachers:

> The personality of the individual--some guys can smooth, soothe, grease, and slide--"the good old boys." Others who come in with fancy statistics and lots of jargon just leave the teachers cold. (IU/3/4)

Responsive Attitude. The personal attributes of successful field agents include, in addition to interpersonal expertise, a responsive

attitude. Educators seemed to want, along with some level of professional and interpersonal expertise, field agents to respond to local district individuality and unique need.

A field agent's having a responsive attitude entails his or her being accessible to the local district, flexible in meeting its needs, and dependable. Fifty-three administrators (76 percent) mentioned this attitudinal aspect of a field agent's success.

Accessibility, or availability, means that the field agent responds to a local district's requests for service:

> [They are] available when we need them. (IU/7/1)
>
> [They are] readily available--we need answers quickly. (CO/6/2)
>
> Availability is the most important thing--that's the key. They have to be there when we want them. (IU/8/2)

Moreover, once contact is made, the field agent should be sensitive to local uniqueness and flexible in providing assistance:

> [They should have] flexibility--enough to respond to unique needs. (IU/2/2)
>
> Versatility--[they should be] able to isolate the situation in a district from the generality. (IU/3/2)
>
> [They should have] an understanding of the district and its problems and the population it serves. (CO/9/2)
>
> [They should be] willing to spend time planning with [the] district, finding out about the district, understanding it. (EIC/2/1)

In addition, the field agent should suggest alternatives that are attuned to local uniqueness but not be too directive:

> They provide models, guidelines, samples. They leave the door open for you to make your own decision on what the final direction is. (EIC/1/6)
>
> [They should have an] attitude of assistance rather than being directive. (CO/1/2)

> [There should be a] willingness to offer assistance rather than recommend an avenue. (IU/5/1)

Several administrators noted that the field agent should have integrity and be dependable. One commented on the field agent's "ability to deliver; if they say they'll do something, they do it" (IU/2/3).

Thus, when educators talk about the need for a field agent to have a responsive attitude, they mean that the field agent is accessible to the local district--he or she is easy to get in touch with and responds quickly to requests for service. The field agent must also know the uniquenesses--strengths and weaknesses--of the district and be able to suggest alternatives without being too directive. Furthermore, the agent should have integrity and be dependable, in short, have a good track record for providing timely, on-target, non-directive assistance.

Personal and Interorganizational Relationships. Our analysis of perspectives on field agent success in working with schools suggests that there are three factors that contribute to that success: professional expertise, interpersonal expertise, and a responsive attitude. These characteristics echo descriptions of successful RESA-district relationships: access and on-target services are provided if the field agent is responsive to district need and has the right skills; good working relationships are built, in part, because of interpersonal expertise; working intimacy develops when the field agent is dependable and responsive. Thus factors promoting a field agent's success in working with local districts are reflected in the characteristics of an effective, helpful RESA-district relationship.

Formal Arrangements

Our analysis of interorganizational relationships between RESAs and school districts suggests that formal arrangements played an important part in RESAs' overall impact. Our problem was to identify those arrangements that built working intimacy, mutual knowledge, and ease of access. A review of informant interviews suggested three such characteristics. These were the RESA's governance structure, its fiscal arrangements, and its service mix.

Governance. Both the IUs and the County Offices had formal committee structures that promoted interaction between local district administrators (usually the superintendents) and RESA administrators. These committees, called the Superintendent Advisory Council (SAC) in Pennsylvania and the Superintendents Roundtable in New Jersey, were composed of top RESA administrators and superintendents from each of the school districts in a RESA's region. Different committees served different functions for RESA decision-making. In Pennsylvania, IU Executive Directors were technically accountable to a board of directors chosen from the boards of client school districts. Because the SAC was made up of superintendents, it could have substantial influence over the board. The County Office's Roundtables in New Jersey had less influence because county superintendents reported to the New Jersey Department of Education, not a local board. However, their importance was in the fact that each county superintendent conducted a monthly forum in which district leaders could advise the RESA, learn about new trends or upcoming legislation, and share common problems. These committees enhanced communication between districts and RESAs, and among districts themselves. Although EICs also had advisory committees, their

membership rotated among districts in their region so continuous representation of each district did not occur.

Advisory committees gave local administrators the opportunity to express service needs, and gave RESAs information that was necessary in order for them to be responsive and provide on-target assistance. Administrators noted:

> We influence them a great deal [through the SAC]; we tell them what types of services we want. (IU/7/2)

> The Superintendents Roundtables--we also act as a group to influence him here, regarding general needs. He [the County Superintendent] develops workshops based on our input at these County Roundtables. (CO/1/2)

These formal meetings supported more informal communications, increased mutual knowledge, and enhanced the potential for responsive service:

> They call me and ask how I feel about this or that. It's not unusual for the Director of the IU to call Superintendents to get opinions. (IU/1/3)

> They [the IU] give a lot of opportunity for input. They are very receptive to people talking at them. (IU/9/2)
> I call the county superintendent and give him suggestions; this is mostly done informally. . . . We can get our ideas in; we do influence him and he listens. (CO/1/2)

> [Informal idea exchange] occurs regularly; starts from the instructional level through administrators to the CO. It's very strong; [It is] normally indirect from the instructional staff. (CO/5/2)

Thus formal governance structures that created opportunities for communication and interaction helped interpersonal ties grow and built continuity in relations between districts and RESAs. Moreover, these structures worked most effectively with County Offices and IUs because of the smaller number of districts served by each agency. Representation of each district on an advisory board was possible because of the manageable number of

people this involved. Representation on EIC committees rotated among districts thus limiting the development of close working relationships.

Fiscal arrangements. Each agency had unique fiscal arrangements which affected interorganizational relationships. In two cases, fiscal arrangements were said to reduce continuity in the district-RESA relationship. The first involved EICs. They were funded, in large part, by grants and contracts from other state or federal agencies. Many of these monies were for special programs or projects. When funding ended, staff hired to work on these projects were terminated. This led to a turnover among EIC staff that dismayed local administrators:

> [There is] no longitudinal work--turnover of staff because of short-term funding. (EIC/1/2)

> They have a high turnover of personnel--this can cause a problem. . . . They are restricted by their grants. (EIC/2/7)

County Offices were also faulted for high staff turnover but not because of short-term funding; here the problem was seen as insufficient pay to attract and retain high-quality personnel:

> They ought to give their staff more money to give more performance so service to us is uninterrupted. The longer they stay, the more they know about us, the more helpful to us they will be. (CO/9/2)

> Another disadvantage is turnover in staff. . . . They've run through a lot of staff and this inconsistency doesn't help us. (CO/3/2)

Fiscal arrangements of the IUs, on the other hand, enhanced service delivery, not necessarily by affecting turnover but by creating an incentive for school districts to use more services. A large portion of IU budgets were from the state and specifically earmarked for special services directly to students. In addition, each district was required to allocate a portion of its state aid to the IU to "purchase" assistance services.

Districts could also purchase further services if they wished. This arrangement made IUs an investment:

> We pay $11,000 into the IU. We get in return about $50,000 in value. (IU/1/3)
>
> The services we need are there and well worth the investment. (IU/2/2)
>
> IU services are effective and it operates efficiently. It boils down to money: some services we need but can't put the money up. For what we spend, we get a lot. (IU/4/2)

Because of this, Pennsylvania administrators assumed a more aggressive stance toward IUs:

> The IU--we turn to them because we finance them. We pay for curriculum services; we want to get our money's worth. (IU/10/3)

Service Mix. Finally, the range of services provided by RESAs--i.e., long-term projects, workshops, and so forth--contributed to a positive working relationship. What was important to school districts was that RESAs were the one place where they could find a variety of services:

> They provide anything and everything: inservice, liaison to find consultants, . . . lots of legislative information. (IU/3/2)
>
> The service they do provide is outstanding. . . . The EIC covers a broad range. They'll help on almost any subject to involve them in. They are the supermarket of education for local practitioners on technical help (EIC/1/6).
>
> They keep abreast of developments in Trenton and let us know as soon as they can about new things. . . . They assist us through information dissemination. They put on some specialized workshops. . . . They frequently refer us to nearby districts who have programs we should know about. (CO/3/1)

The strength of the RESAs in this study was the variety of services they offered. These services were the foundation for the working relationships that allowed trust and mutual understanding to grow.

Implications

This study of local educators' perceptions of RESAs describes the contribution that these agencies have made to the functioning of local education agencies and suggests options to consider in strengthening RESAs' service capacities even further. It also presents information for examining the role of RESAs and other dissemination programs in a time of changing priorities.

One of the most striking characteristics of RESAs is the range of areas in which they assist school districts. RESA assistance goes beyond the areas of curriculum and instruction to helping school districts solve problems of management and administration and coping with external pressures, particularly those stemming from state regulation. Assistance in these areas is not new and not strictly limited to RESAs. There is some evidence that some national dissemination programs at least helped with problems of management. What is significant is that certain kinds of assistance valued by local educators may not be equally important to those who oversee the provision of assistance. It is our impression that state and federal officials responsible for agencies that assist schools are more concerned with promoting changes they desire than with helping districts cope with external pressures. In this way, they are, in fact, the source of a good deal of that pressure. These different perspectives can create dilemmas both for RESAs and for those agencies that oversee them.

The issue that often confronts RESAs is whether they should give priority to the concerns of the state agencies that oversee their own work or to the problems of the local agencies they were created to serve. Often, they resolve this dilemma by helping local educators cope with the issues

raised by central authorities. In these instances, a RESA's stance may be on the "side" of the locals as a helper in solving a problem created by a third party. This was certainly the case in the many times RESAs helped school districts solve administrative and environmental problems. The ability to take this stance is what makes RESAs useful to both local districts and the states.

The issue for those who oversee RESAs or any other agencies that assist educators is how to strike a balance between their own concerns and concerns of local educators. Most often, this occurs when the assisting agency is called upon to solve some policy problem which is not of high priority to local educators. It is likely that in the course of addressing that problem, local educators will raise new concerns. Policymakers must then decide the extent to which the agency should be allowed to expand its services into other areas. There are two arguments for allowing such expansion. First, the "problem" identified by the agency's overseers may not be a problem at all for local educators. Nevertheless, other improvements may be needed and by broadening the service mandate of assistance agencies, these needs could be met. Second, providing a broad mix of services helps solidify relationships and this, in turn, makes it easier for the RESA to carry out improvement activities important to central planners.

Another striking characteristic is the range of services provided by RESAs and the frequency of brief contacts. How does one assess the value of these contacts? One view devalues brief interactions. Impressed by the complexity of the implementation process (Fullan, 1982) and the need for external assistance to promote change (Louis, 1981), advocates of this view hold that long-term projects are of most value. Consequently, they are

critical of agencies that do not stress this kind of assistance. This position was taken by state officials overseeing the work of RESAs we examined.

A contrasting view suggests that there are advantages in providing a variety of service modes. While acknowledging the importance of long-term projects for promoting change, it suggests that other kinds of interactions serve other purposes that are also valuable. For example, many of the areas where RESAs provide assistance do not require major change and implementation. In these areas, providing information (through a phone call), materials (from a resource center), or skills training (through a workshop) is the most appropriate response. The fact that a mix of services is available from a single agency strengthens the relationship between the district and the agency, and builds the basis of trust that facilitates long-term projects when they are useful. Advocates of this point of view judge the utility of an agency not according to the kind of services it offers, but according to the fit between services and needs.

For the purposes of strengthening RESA service capacities, the observations of our informants suggest that more attention be given to RESAs' organizational design and how they recruit and train their staffs than to trying to arrive at any single service approach. Briefly, from our interviews, it seems clear that successful service providers build a relationship of trust and easy communications with their client districts. This relationship is dependent, to a large part, on the characteristics of the individuals working with those districts as well as on formal relationships between the RESA and the school district. Personal characteristics include a knowledge of one's field--both technical content and how to get things

done in schools--the skills to work well with others, and a desire to provide services valued by the user. These characteristics become criteria for recruitment of RESA field staff, objectives for their formal training, and--in the case of desiring to be of value--factors to be stressed through informal socialization of new employees. However, these characteristics alone will not suffice. They need to be enhanced further by formal arrangements that built trust and communications. One way to do this is to use advisory committees and policy boards. Needs assessments may also be useful, but they lack the quality of two-way communications that characterizes committee structures. Other useful formal arrangements are fiscal structures that guarantee staff continuity, for example, stabilizing funding so it is not based on specific projects, creating an interest in seeing that one's own money is well spent, and providing a mix of services so mutual understandings can grow between districts and RESAs.

Finally, our study suggests that RESAs and national dissemination programs play different but complementary roles. Dissemination programs tend to respond to centrally derived goals, such as putting research into practice. They serve local interests as a way of meeting central concerns. However, their contact with specific districts is typically temporary, either because the systems themselves are temporary or because they seek to promote improvement in large numbers of districts. It is a rare district that attempts to implement several NDN innovations in a short space of time.

RESAs, by their nature are more responsive to local concerns. At a minimum, they have more permanent relationships with a limited number of client districts. Although they are often licensed and funded by state

agencies, this legal and economic support depends to some extent on political support from local districts and the legislature. Because the relationship is more permanent and involves a wider range of services, it becomes closer; hence the comment that RESAs are "only a phone call away." Moreover, because RESA activities shaped largely by their clients, something not always true of dissemination programs, it is easier and more logical for them to move into areas not of concern to central agencies: areas such as coping with state and federal agencies in the most advantageous way.

However, all is not well with RESAs. Despite their acknowledged benefits, RESAs may be an endangered species. The current political climate raises questions about whether the duplication in RESAs and national dissemination programs should continue, and in fact, whether either is necessary. Both RESAs and national dissemination programs are a response to and part of the growing complexity of America's educational system. RESAs provide local educators a friendly tool for dealing with that complexity (Cohen, 1982). However, the country is currently attempting to reduce this complexity at the center. The current administration is bent on deregulation, consolidation of initiatives, and reduced funding (Clark and Amiot, 1980). Growing financial constraints are already making the continuation of RESAs precarious. If our respondents are to be believed, the demise of RESAs would be unwelcome and would have potentially harmful effects on the effectiveness of school districts.

Endnotes

1. To date, three other reports have been completed. Two of them examine the roles and activities of RESA field staff (Firestone and Wilson, 1981; Firestone and Wilson, 1983). A third examines educators' contacts with a variety of different assistance agencies (Firestone, Wilson, and Rossman, 1982b).

2. Because RBS' mission is to provide research and development services to the Pennsylvania, New Jersey, Delaware area, we chose RESAs that existed within that area. Delaware has no RESAs.

3. Interview identifiers can be deciphered as follows. The letters refer to the type of agency that identified the respondent's district: IU = Pennsylvania Intermediate Unit, EIC = New Jersey Educational Improvement Center, and CO = New Jersey County Office. The first number refers to the specific agency, and the second refers to the specific district. Thus, EIC/2/3 is the third district from the second EIC.

4. To examine perceptions of RESA helpfulness, we reviewed all the data in each interview. Then each interview was coded to reflect three levels of perceived helpfulness. Because we selected districts that worked a great deal with RESAs, none of the perceptions were clearly negative; but they did range from neutral (13) to extremely positive (26) with a middle category in between (32). Because we were interested in successful service delivery, analysis in this section relied on data from those interviews coded high and medium on helpfulness.

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Appendix A

The Regional Educational Service Agencies

RESAs have been a part of American education since the flowering of the common school movement. The first were the county offices founded in Delaware in 1829 (Knezevich, 1969). County offices were rarely service oriented, however. Their role changed, though, as the number of school districts in the country dropped from over 127,000 in 1932 to around 17,000 in 1971 (Stephens, 1979). Modern RESAs began to take shape in 1948 with the formation of New York's Boards of Cooperative Educational Services (BOCES). In the 1960s and 1970s, several states (including Michigan and Pennsylvania) converted their administratively oriented county office systems to more service oriented RESAs. Other states, such as Texas, founded totally new systems.

Providing services to local education agencies is a common thrust of most modern RESAs. However, because RESAs were founded at different times and in response to different state situations, they vary substantially in their purposes and activities. This research examines three different kinds of RESAs: the Intermediate Units (IUs) of Pennsylvania and the Education Improvement Centers (EICs) and County Offices of New Jersey. Each of these is discussed in turn.

The Intermediate Units

Pennsylvania's Intermediate Units were created in 1971 to replace an existing system of County Offices made obsolete by substantial school district consolidation in the 1960s. Their enabling legislation in 1970 [Act 2 (HB 41) and Act 102 (HB 40), eff. July 1, 1971] stated that Intermedi-

ate Units would provide "essential services formerly provided by county boards of school directors." These services were primarily for special and vocational education, but also included transportation, psychological services and the provision of instructional materials.

To help plan and implement the Intermediate Unit system, the Office of the Assistant Commissioner of Basic Education prepared a pamphlet entitled "Establishing the Intermediate Unit" (1970). The Intermediate Unit was described in this source as

> that echelon of a three-echelon state education system (school district, intermediate unit, and state education department), which provides consultative, advisory or education program services to school districts. The responsibility for administration, supervision and program operation belongs to school districts. The intermediate unit provides ancillary services necessary to improve the state system of education.

The IU mission includes responsibility for the operation of special, vocational, and non-public school student services, and for consultative and training services for school improvement. This latter mission is based in the original IU legislation which empowers IUs to provide such services as curriculum development and instructional materials, continuing professional education, state and federal agency liaison, management services, and any other services approved by the IU's board (Dario, 1976). Subsequent legislation strengthened IU's consultative and training role by allowing the IUs to offer inservice courses that teachers could use to meet state certification requirements and, with the approval of the employing districts, to accumulate credits on district salary scales (Bellew, 1979). Although most IU staff spent the bulk of their time providing direct services to students, they are also an important source of training and assistance for Pennsylvania's school districts.

Table A provides a quantitative description of IUs. The average IU has about 241 employees, thus making IUs the largest organizations included in this study. This figure overestimates their ability to contribute to knowledge use and dissemination functions, however, since most IU staff provide direct services to students. In the mid-1970s, 74 percent of the IU staff worked in special education (Dario, 1976). Our efforts to locate training and assistance personnel identified only two or three such individuals in most IUs, and in the largest organization only 12.

Table A

Comparison of Three Kinds of Regional Educational Service Agencies

	Intermediate Units	Education Improvement Centers	County Offices
Number	27[a]	4	21
Average No. of Employees	241	58	5
Average No. of Square Miles	1671	1959	338
Average No. of Districts	19	148	28
Average No. of Students (in 1,000s)	64	346	66
Percent Minority Enrollment	5	24	24
No. of Districts with More than 8,000 Students	1.2	7	1.3

[a] In addition to these multidistrict IUs, the Philadelphia and Pittsburgh school districts have IUs that are part of their special education operations. Data on these urban IUs are excluded.

Most IUs operate in either rural or suburban regions. The average IU serves a large geographical area with relatively few school districts and students. Typically, within each area, there is only one large district that might have the capacity to provide a great deal of training and assistance services internally. IUs serve very small minority student populations.

The Education Improvement Centers

New Jersey's EICs share the assistance orientation of the IUs, but their mission requires a greater focus on training and technical assistance. Their enabling legislation defines that mission as one of providing support and assistance to local school districts and to members of teaching and administrative staffs through the delivery of materials, techniques, and expertise necessary to improve school programs and services (State of New Jersey, Chapter 58, Laws of 1978).

This support and assistance is further defined to include helping diagnose educational problems, providing staff development and training, consulting during the implementation of improvement plans, developing and disseminating information and materials related to instructional and management processes and programs, and any other services requested by the Governing Board and approved by the Commissioner of Education. The law further states that this support and assistance is to be provided "on request."

EICs' enabling legislation was not passed until 11 years after the first EIC began operating in 1967. By this time, the basic pattern of EIC service delivery had been established. EICs' specialization in assistance services stems partly from the variety of intermediate agencies in New

Jersey and partly from the allocation of tasks to local districts. Many of the student services provided by IUs in Pennsylvania are handled in New Jersey by local districts or by cooperative of school districts.

EICs present a somewhat different demographic picture than IUs (Table A). Because the state in which they operate is smaller, there are only four of them. Also, because they concentrate on assistance and training, they have smaller staffs. However, EICs actually have more individuals offering training and assistance to school districts than do IUs. EICs serve geographic regions that are approximately the same size as those served by IUs. Yet, because New Jersey is more urbanized and less aggressive in consolidating school districts, they serve more districts and students. The school districts they serve also tend to be larger and with a substantially larger proportion of minority students.

The New Jersey County Offices

In addition to EICs, New Jersey has a parallel system of 21 County Offices dating back to the formation of the state's Department of Education. In the early 1970s, the duties of these agencies included a combination of monitoring, assistance, and actual administration of school districts. County superintendents reviewed district budgets and sometimes had to approve them. They also had to approve certain kinds of contracts. In other areas, the county superintendent served largely in an advisory capacity, with a small staff of helping teachers who offered technical assistance to schools.

With the passage of New Jersey's Thorough and Efficient Education legislation (T&E) in 1975, the role of the County Office changed dramatically. This legislation established minimum performance standards for school

districts and required the state to intervene when those standards were not met. The mission of County Offices was undefined to emphasize monitoring for compliance with the law. This is illustrated in the position description for county superintendents:

> The primary duty of the superintendent is to administer the school approval system within the county. This shall be accomplished through leadership of a county staff of school program coordinators (SPCs) having academic or technical knowledge in . . . such . . . school program areas as may be required to monitor adequately the programs of instruction of schools and school districts pursuant to New Jersey laws and the State Board of Education rules and regulations for a thorough and efficient system of education.

The monitoring procedures that County Offices were to follow were designed by the New Jersey Department of Education. Initially, these agencies were responsible for ensuring that school districts implemented a required six-step planning procedure. Later they began administering the state's Minimum Basic Skills (MBS) tests. By 1977, their monitoring responsibilities included ensuring that school buildings and facilities met state standards, that school districts had programs required by state and federal laws, and that these programs followed relevant regulations.

The monitoring function of County Offices affects the kind of technical assistance they provide to school districts in four ways. First, as County Offices identify gaps between state-defined standards and schools' performance, they are, in fact, conducting a needs assessment. The subsequent threat of state-imposed sanctions then prods districts to find ways to change. Second, because County Offices know their districts' problems, they are able to refer them to other appropriate assistance agencies. Third, County Offices promote an exchange of information among school districts in each county through their own activities and through a monthly Superintendents Roundtable. Finally, County Offices themselves provide

limited technical assistance. This technical assistance is frequently in the form of explanations about how a particular district is out of compliance and what it can do to comply. For schools, an important by-product of these discussions is often new knowledge about principles, practices, and materials that can be used to improve district management and instruction. In addition, sometimes County Offices may develop relationships with districts that encourage district staff to seek information on a variety of issues not directly related to the T&E legislation.

The County Offices serve the smallest areas and have the smallest staffs of all the agencies included in this research (Table A). In spite of this, they serve as many students and more districts than the IUs. Like the EICs, they serve a relatively large proportion of minority students. However, the areas in which they work is smaller than those of EICs and with fewer districts and students.